
Lateral File Cabinets

Q1. What is the difference between a lateral and a vertical file cabinet?

A: A lateral file cabinet has wide, shallow drawers that pull out from front to back with files hanging side-to-side — you can see all the files in the drawer at once from the front. A vertical file cabinet has narrow, deep drawers with files hanging front-to-back — you're looking at the file tabs in a row from above. Lateral cabinets are wider and lower, making them suitable for use as work surfaces and for high-frequency file access. Vertical cabinets are narrower and taller, taking up less wall space but requiring more reaching for rear-drawer files.

Q2. What drawer count should I choose — 2, 3, 4, or 5 drawers?

A: The right drawer count depends on how much filing capacity you need and what you want to use the top surface for. Two-drawer laterals (approximately 28" to 30" tall) work as credenza-height storage with a functional top surface. Four-drawer units (52" to 54" tall) maximize filing capacity while keeping the top drawer accessible for most adults. Five-drawer units (65" to 68" tall) require reaching above shoulder height for the top drawer, which is impractical for short users. For most offices, the 4-drawer configuration offers the best balance of capacity and usability.

Q3. Can a lateral file cabinet hold legal-size documents?

A: Yes — most commercial lateral file cabinets accommodate both letter-size (8.5"×11") and legal-size (8.5"×14") hanging files. The wider drawer width of a lateral cabinet handles both sizes without requiring a special adapter in most cases. Confirm the product's stated file size compatibility before purchasing, as a small number of narrow lateral models (such as 24" wide units) may not accommodate legal size files without an add-on frame.

Q4. Do lateral file cabinets lock?

A: Yes — most commercial lateral file cabinets include a locking mechanism. The most common format is a core lock that, when engaged, blocks all drawers from opening (a full-width lock bar). Some models have individual drawer locks. For offices storing sensitive or regulated documents, look specifically for cabinets with a full-width lock bar rather than just a single-drawer lock, as the full-width bar secures all drawers simultaneously with one key.

Q5. How heavy is a lateral file cabinet when loaded?

A: An empty 4-drawer 36" lateral file cabinet typically weighs 130 to 180 lbs. When fully loaded with documents, the total weight can reach 300 to 450 lbs. This has significant implications for placement (avoid upper-floor locations without confirming the floor load rating) and for safety (never try to move a loaded lateral cabinet — always remove drawers or empty files before moving). The weight also means lateral cabinets should ideally be placed on their permanent location before loading.

Q6. What is a full-extension drawer slide and why does it matter?

A: A full-extension drawer slide allows the drawer to extend completely out of the cabinet body, making every file in the drawer accessible without reaching into the back. Standard (partial) extension slides allow the drawer to extend about 75% of its depth, meaning the rear portion of the drawer is accessed by reaching in and feeling around. For lateral file cabinets used frequently, full-extension slides are a significant usability improvement — they're worth specifying, especially for high-frequency-use filing environments.

Q7. How do I decide between steel and laminate lateral file cabinets?

A: Choose steel for file rooms, storage areas, and administrative environments where appearance is secondary to durability and capacity. Choose laminate for executive offices, reception areas, and any setting where the cabinet needs to coordinate with wood or contemporary-finish furniture. Steel cabinets are more durable (resistant to dents and scratches), less expensive for the same capacity, and easier to maintain. Laminate cabinets look more polished and match wood office furniture better, but are more susceptible to surface damage from impacts.

Q8. Can I use a lateral file cabinet as a printer stand?

A: Yes — a 2-drawer or 3-drawer lateral file cabinet makes an excellent printer stand. The top surface at approximately 28" to 36" height is the right height for a standard desktop printer, and the cabinet provides filing storage immediately below the printer. For this use, a 36" wide unit gives the printer adequate surface area plus room alongside for print output stacking. Confirm the printer's weight is within the cabinet's top surface weight rating (typically 100 to 150 lbs for the top surface on commercial units).

Q9. Are lateral file cabinets ADA compliant?

A: Standard commercial lateral file cabinets at 28" to 54" tall with drawers that extend outward are generally accessible for wheelchair users, as the wide-shallow drawer design doesn't require reaching deeply or high. The specific ADA requirement for reach range is 15" to 48" above the floor — most lateral file drawers fall within this range. For the specific ADA compliance status of a given product in a regulated environment, consult the product manufacturer's specifications and confirm with your accessibility compliance authority.

Q10. How many hanging file folders fit in a 36" lateral file drawer?

A: A standard 36" wide lateral file drawer accommodates approximately 25 to 30 standard hanging file folders (with contents) when filled to a comfortable working density. Overfilling (jamming folders in tightly) makes files difficult to retrieve and can damage folder tabs. For planning purposes, assume a 36" drawer holds approximately 100 to 150 documents per folder × 25 to 30 folders = 2,500 to 4,500 documents per drawer, or roughly 10,000 to 18,000 documents in a 4-drawer lateral — more than enough for most department-level filing needs.

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